INTRODUCTION

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The articles featured in this special edition of the Journal of African Elections were presented at the first colloquium of the WIPHOLD-Brigalia Bam Chair in Electoral Democracy in Africa from 29-30 May 2013 at the University of South Africa (Unisa).

The theme of the colloquium, which will be an annual feature of the chair’s events, was ‘The Evolving Role of Elections in a Democracy in Africa’. It highlighted the value of elections as a component of liberal democracy in Africa’s quest for democratisation.

The colloquium coincided with Africa’s celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Organisation of African Unity / African Union and its role in promoting change of government through democratic, transparent, free and fair elections in Africa.

Held as Unisa marked its 140th anniversary, the colloquium was inspired by South Africa’s preparations for its fourth national and provincial elections, which will also mark the country’s 20 years of democracy following the historic 1994 elections. Aimed at initiating meaningful dialogue leading to those elections and beyond, the objectives of the colloquium were:

- to bring together scholars, election officials, policy-makers, members of the election management community and those with keen interest in elections, electoral democracy and the role of elections in Africa’s democratisation;
- to share experiences of elections and to strengthen the intersection between quality scholarship and election management best practice for promoting democracy in Africa;
- to highlight critical issues for research, legislative and policy review or amendment and for better election management practices and implementation; and
- to serve as a platform for the cross-pollination of ideas and for sharing conceptual and theoretical frameworks to stimulate excellence in practical election management in Africa.
During the colloquium participants interrogated the nature of Africa’s elections and had meaningful discussions about the quality, integrity, fairness and contribution of such elections to what some regard as the era of African renaissance and unification.

A pertinent question asked during the plenary session was: ‘Why do we still have violence, political intolerance and election-related skirmishes in Africa if we have the type of brain power and abilities that were reflected in the composition of the colloquium?’ This question was tackled in most of the discussions and ten papers were presented, on the following sub-themes:

- Political parties and the promotion of democratic elections in Africa;
- Gender, politics and women’s role in a democracy;
- Constitutionalism, election management bodies and the legal framework of elections;
- Contemporary issues relating to elections and electoral democracy;
- Safety and security, peace and observer missions in Africa.

The colloquium benefited from a range of quality presentations by experienced election practitioners and researchers, all of whom examined critically the role of elections in Africa’s democratisation trajectory.

Sebudubudu and Maripe analyse Botswana’s elections from an unusual, but important, angle. They posit that the electoral process in Botswana belies the popular view that the country is a haven of democracy because even though there have been numerous peaceful elections since the country gained independence in 1966, all were won by one party, the Botswana Democratic Party. Thus, they contend, electoral competition in Botswana is deceptive and the country experiences ‘a deficit of competitive elections, a key requisite for the consolidation of democracy’.

This raises contentious points about the quality and depth of Botswana’s elections, which, they argue, do not comply with international standards of free and fair elections. In many ways this argument ties in with the view frequently cited in the literature that elections cannot be the sole barometer for measuring the tempo of democracy, especially in Africa. It also corroborates the hypothesis of Kenneth Good (2002) about the fragility of Botswana’s liberal democracy.

Mavungu’s article on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) focuses on the issue of the disputed 2011 elections, a subject of intense debate among political parties, voters, observers, media and political analysts both in the DRC and globally. Mavungu argues that the elections were expected to be a significant
improvement on those of 2006 but that they were tarnished by grave irregularities and criticised by most observers as lacking credibility.

He further argues that, given the nature and extent of electoral fraud, the 2011 elections were a tragedy which cannot be put down to technical and accidental factors. Furthermore, he adds, there was a systematic and state-sponsored plan to rig the elections in favour of the incumbent president and party, using illegitimate and excessive violence to terrorise any protesters who challenged the fraud.

Mavungu’s contention that ‘the democratic project in the Congo has experienced a dramatic reversal’ is a sad reminder that it might take the DRC a very long time to proceed along the path to democratisation using elections as one of the tools if such blatantly fraudulent practices as those outlined in his article are tolerated in future elections.

Sadiki’s article tackles the thorny issue of election-related violence and how it has manifested itself in Africa’s political landscape in the past two decades. The article underscores the current interest in election-related violence in Africa, focusing on the patterns, causes and consequences of such violence. It identifies cross-cutting commonalities in different African countries, arguing that a thorough understanding of the patterns and causes of election-related violence in Africa is a point of departure for addressing the problem. It suggests that effective prevention should embrace a multi-level approach, targeting all election stakeholders, especially political leaders, the electoral management body, civil society organisations, the general public and external partners.

Shilaho argues that Kenya’s 2013 elections were significant and a test of the institutions created by the 2010 Constitution. He argues that in 2007 Kenya experienced violently disputed elections partly because of weak and dysfunctional institutions that were incapable of arbitrating political disputes impartially. The fact that Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, who were elected in 2013, presented a joint presidential ticket despite having been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) as being among the suspected masterminds of the 2007-8 post-election violence also complicated the situation.

Furthermore, notes Shilaho, the stakes were much higher in 2013 than during any other election in Kenya’s independence history. He adds that, surprisingly, factors such as the new Constitution, some judicial reforms, the tribal alliance between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin tribes and the ICC case all ensured that the elections were relatively violence free compared to others held since Kenya’s return to multiparty democracy in 1991.

Shilaho contends that the presidential contest was primarily about control of the state by expediently cobbled ethnic alliances of self-styled ethno-regional barons looking for spoliation opportunities. Thus, implementation of the
Constitution, which was intended to secure Kenya’s democratisation process, was bound to be opposed by what Shilaho terms the country’s oligarchy.

Kibuka-Sebitosi’s article examines the critical issue of gender and elections, arguing that the relationship between them has largely been ignored despite the fact that the majority of voters tend to be women, while political leaders and authority figures are mostly men. Tackling the understanding of gender in the African context, Kibuka-Sebitosi analyses the underlying causes of what she calls the ‘gender paradox’. Primarily, the article uses a multi-inter- and trans-disciplinary approach, which helps to underscore the fact that the inter-relationship between gender and elections cuts across different disciplinary boundaries.

Kibuka-Sebitosi argues that the reasons for the gender disparity in Africa’s elections appear to be deeply embedded in the historical and ideological traditions within the political, economic and social dimensions of Africa’s development. Hence, the article concludes with an identification of barriers to entry for women candidates and the relevant strategies for transforming gender inequity in African elections.

Maphunye’s article also tackles gender-related issues with regard to elections but focuses on the extent of women’s participation and representation in the politics of Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. It argues that increased democratisation in the sub-region might imply that gender equality in SADC countries’ politics is irrelevant but that women’s political participation and representation remain controversial owing to gender stereotypes, rhetoric, tokenism and patriarchy.

Critically examining the political processes of SADC countries, specifically elections, gender and women’s role in a democracy, Maphunye acknowledges progressive legislation and some ‘successes’ in a few countries, but contends that the situation of women in the politics of these countries remains unsatisfactory and requires political will and collective action to ensure substantive participation and representation in governance processes. The article argues that much more effort needs to be made to understand the hurdles women face in politics, especially political party rhetoric and patriarchy.

The article concludes by revisiting the debates over the introduction of a women’s quota in political parties to improve participation and representation and recommends measures for empowering women candidates and political party members and urging women to show more interest in politics, particularly elections.

Tötemeyer’s article, written from a practitioner’s perspective, focuses on the revision and reform of Namibia’s Electoral Act (Act No 24 of 1992). Tötemeyer states that this reform was undertaken through consultations with stakeholders at
public meetings countrywide. Through this process recommendations were made about how the country’s electoral law could be improved. The article explains that electoral revision implies a re-examination of the law within the context of democracy and aims to discover and rectify errors and shortcomings.

Tötemeyer argues that electoral revision achieves reform and that the two concepts are interlinked as they both aim to strengthen the qualities of electoral legislation. Accordingly, he suggests that efficiency and the public’s wishes and expectations must be taken into consideration in such a process, which must include attending to the administrative and managerial task of running elections and the normative character of an electoral process.

He identifies a number of principles related to the character of electoral justice, adding that such principles should particularly be pursued by the electoral bodies responsible for conducting elections in a democratic environment.

In conclusion, participants in the 2013 colloquium concurred that close collaboration and interaction among the different sectors that work in the field of elections, as represented at the colloquium, should be sustained. This should entail further research into matters related to African elections as this will help to sharpen the teaching and supervision of university and higher education students who are interested in studying and working in the area of elections.

Most important of all, a colloquium such as this should also enable Africans to enhance capacity building for African election management officials, especially through modules such as Unisa’s Management of Democratic Elections in Africa, a home-grown attempt to close the current gaps in election management, scholarship and policy in Africa.

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